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# CH'AN NEWS LETTER

No. 84, March 1991

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## Human Consciousness in The Ch'an Perspective

*(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng-yen at Brooklyn College on  
November 8, 1990)*

LEVEL  
ONE

We have very little time today, so I will give only a brief summary of the Ch'an view of human consciousness.

Today's talk on human consciousness can be divided into three sections; first, the general Buddhist view; second, the Ch'an perspective; and last, the Ch'an approach to the problems that arise from human consciousness.

### The General Perspective of Buddhist Practice

Buddhism generally divides human consciousness into false mind and True Mind. False mind, sometimes called the illusory mind, refers to the mental activity of ordinary sentient beings. This mind is filled with innumerable vexations that arise from a self-centered view of the world. True Mind refers to the mind of wisdom, a mind free of vexation. It is true, however, that Buddhism understands the false mind to include all levels of human consciousness and all activities associated with it.

Then what distinguishes the True Mind? True Mind arises only when mental activity is free from self-centeredness. At this point your mind is no longer subject to ordinary human consciousness. When this happens, consciousness is no longer subjective. Only perfect, completely objective activity remains.

Now let us return to false mind. It is important to know that false mind is really what we call human consciousness. Consciousness has two aspects. The first is known as discriminating consciousness. This is taken to be the activities of cognition, of apprehension, and of discrimination (commonly, what we take to be memory, judgment, and reasoning.)

However, there is still an aspect of consciousness which does not make discriminations. (Note that this "aspect" of consciousness really refers to the seventh and eighth consciousness, as understood by the Yogacara, or Consciousness Only school. For the sake of this talk, we will call this aspect, "fundamental consciousness." See Newsletter #63 for more information concerning the seventh and eighth consciousness.)

According to the Yogacara school, it is this fundamental consciousness which makes a person what he or she is. It is tempting to say that this fundamental consciousness is the "core," "essence," or "true entity" of



someone, but these terms are misleading. They make one think of substance, of something material, and this is not the understanding of Buddhism. These terms are sometimes used to define what it is that moves from life to life when a being is reborn, but this is definitely nothing like what Christianity understands to be the soul.

Now, we talk about consciousness in living beings, but do we recognize such a phenomenon in animals? In the West this question is usually answered by the classification of the animal. Mainstream Western science recognizes the presence of consciousness in what are considered "higher animals," such as elephants, monkeys, or cats, but it does not recognize a consciousness in the lower forms of animals, such as earthworms or insects.

Lower life forms may lack discriminating human consciousness, but they still have fundamental consciousness. This is to say that all living beings have consciousness. Thus, Buddhist compassion is directed to all living beings, not just to human beings. In the Buddhist view, all living beings, human or not, can evolve and attain the highest state, Buddhahood.

It is the goal of Buddhist practice to free all living beings from discriminating consciousness, the source of all vexations. And to truly reach liberation we must also be freed from fundamental consciousness, because it is here that our karma is centered. That is, all the seeds of our previous actions and the forces that they exert upon us are stored here. For the True Mind of wisdom to appear, a human being must be free from discriminating consciousness and the karmic force of fundamental consciousness must be defused. This is the direction of Buddhist practice.

But how can we truly tell when we have overcome vexation and reached wisdom? Vexation and wisdom are both mental activities, but the crucial difference is that the mental activities associated with vexations are centered on the self. It is this centering on the self that causes suffering. Wisdom, however, is uncon-

cerned with the self. With wisdom one can see things as they are, untinted by personal subjectivity.

### The Ch'an Point of View

Don't get the idea that Ch'an is something different from Buddhism. It is simply a part of Buddhism and its understanding and perspective fall within Buddhism's basic tenets.

In Ch'an we speak of a Buddha mind, which is the same as the True Mind referred to earlier; that is, the mind of wisdom. We also speak of the mind of sentient beings, which is the same as the false mind of vexation.

One important term used in Ch'an can be translated as "to illuminate the mind and perceive Buddha nature." Why does the mind need illumination? It is because the mind of sentient beings is clouded in darkness, and this darkness must be lifted if you are to see the true nature of reality. Thus the term "to illuminate the mind and perceive Buddha nature" has the same meaning as what we described earlier – leaving the mind of vexation behind in order to attain wisdom. So the goal of Ch'an practice is no different than that of Buddhism.

The goal is the same, but the words are often different. Ch'an does not usually use terms such as "idea" or "discriminating consciousness." Ch'an simply uses the word "mind." Only someone well-versed in the tradition who can read the writings of a Ch'an master is able to tell whether "mind" refers to the Buddha mind or to that of an ordinary sentient being.

Ch'an practice then, revolves around this idea of mind. For the beginning practitioner, the foundation of practice and the path of practice are none other than the mind of vexation – false mind. But the goal of practice is the Buddha's wisdom, the True Mind.

Let us now talk about consciousness from the Western perspective. There are times when the word, con-



sciousness, as understood in the West, can be used to represent the word mind as it is used in Ch'an. However, the word "consciousness" cannot cover all of the meanings of mind used in the Ch'an tradition.

In the West mental activities are researched, analyzed, and recorded. But can the state of True Mind, the mind of wisdom, be considered a mental activity, and can it bear the scrutiny of Western science?

If we attempt to use "consciousness" to explain True Mind, there will be quite a bit of confusion. It might be possible to say that the True Mind represents a kind of pure, undefiled mental activity and false mind represents impure mental activity, but this would still be unclear. Ch'an simply uses mind and avoids confusion.

When we speak of Ch'an practice, we can see that both the Buddha Mind, and the sentient being mind are not separate from one another. For we look upon the Buddha Mind as the goal of practice and the sentient being mind as the process of practice.

When you first start to practice, it is likely that you will notice that your mind is not at ease, not calm and peaceful. You use a method to change that. Such a method of practice is called "calming the mind." This method can also be called "stilling the mind," in which case the goal is to bring the mind to a standstill. This process can also be thought of as "clarifying and settling the mind." One can use the analogy of a glass of muddy water that becomes clear once the water is still and the mud sinks to the bottom.

### **The Ch'an Approach to the Problems that Arise from Human Consciousness**

The flier that announced this lecture contained two Chinese characters which can be translated as "beginner's mind." What does this mean? This is the mind of an ordinary sentient being who begins to take the first step in turning his or her mind toward illumination.

This step is sometimes called, "the initial generation of the Bodhi mind." What is Bodhi? Bodhi is a Sanskrit term which can be translated as enlightenment, awakening, or realization.

The Ch'an approach toward resolving one's problems is quite different from the psychological methods used in the West. In the West a person's problems are the centerpiece of the analysis. They are analyzed, themes and motifs are suggested, and the patient is urged to recognize patterns that have developed from early childhood and break the hold they have upon him.

The approach of Ch'an is different. When a practitioner feels a need to deal with his own problems, he is urged to simply put them down and leave them behind. This does not mean that you should ignore what you have to do. It simply means that you abandon the idea that what confronts you constitutes a "problem." You continue to deal with situations, but you no longer see them as problems. In this way the problems cease to exist.

How do you go about putting aside your problems? The solution arises when you develop compassion for other beings. When you see the vexation and suffering that torments others, you can try to help them resolve their problems and end their suffering. You forget your own problems.

Where does this compassion come from? Compassion comes from the Bodhi mind, the mind of realization. As you develop this mind, you begin to engage in activities that are no longer self-centered. You begin to deal with all problems in an objective way. Ironically, it is in this way that you will resolve your own problems. With this attitude, you clear away the mind of vexation and attain the mind of wisdom.

Last week I traveled to the West Coast where I gave a talk in a hospital. The audience included psychiatrists and other neuro-scientists. At the end of the talk they asked me the following question: "You say that



your methods are simpler than ours. How can that be?"

I said, "when you deal with patients, you have to find out a great deal about their personal history. You must ask a great many questions. They often must come back again and again, and this process can last for years. When I address someone's problems I don't spend too much time finding out about their background. I say one or two sentences, and that will begin to provide them with help."

I added that among my students, or my patients if you prefer, there are a number of psychologists and psychiatrists. Some come to me because they have developed problems after listening to so many of their patients' problems. Others come for no other reason than to learn the way of Ch'an practice so that they can help themselves or their patients. But when one is first exposed to Ch'an, it may not be very easy to use Ch'an methods in conjunction with psychotherapy. The basic conceptions are quite different. Generally speaking, the Western approach is more analytical and the Ch'an approach is more immediate. It is also important to add that unless the Ch'an master is outstanding, it will be difficult for him to be effective in helping people. By contrast, some types of Western therapy can be learned in a reasonable amount of time, so that a therapist can provide his or her patients with some relief. But in the beginning, it is not easy to combine the two approaches.

Let us now look at the Ch'an method and the ways in which it can help people deal with psychological problems. Ch'an recognizes that suffering, vexation, and confusion are created within the mind, not from some external, physical world. This is the state of consciousness that Ch'an methods address.

Methods of cultivation fall under two general classifications. The first is called, "contemplating the mind"; the second, "being free from, or transcending, one's thoughts." The methods in each classification

serve a special purpose. Which category is best depends on the person. Although it may happen that one person can employ methods in both categories.

The general procedure in contemplating the mind is this: you keep your attention on the present moment and focus on some external object, a feeling or part of the body, or simply a thought or an idea. If you are concentrating on a thought, since concentrating is itself a thought, this can be described as using a later thought to observe an earlier one. This method helps to overcome the mind's disorganization, the usual state of your mind. This is when your thoughts come and go in a disorderly and random manner. However, this method will help you stabilize your mind. Gradually, thoughts will become simpler and less disorganized.

There are many specific methods of contemplating the mind. For example, you can concentrate on the up and down movement of your lower abdomen while you breathe, or you can concentrate on the inhalation or exhalation of your breathing. Or, as mentioned earlier, you can watch your thoughts as they arise and disappear. Or you can try to keep your mind in a state free of thoughts. With this method, if any thoughts arise, you ignore them and try to bring your mind back to the thought-free state.

These methods may seem simple, but they are not that easy to do. They take a lot of practice. We have an eight-hour class at our Center just to teach the very simple method of counting breaths. This is because there are many subtle aspects to this method and many principles that lie behind it. Improperly understood and executed, the method will leave your mind running wild no matter how hard you try to contain it.

Transcending your thoughts, the second category, is a method that consists of maintaining the attitude that you do not care about yourself or others. The goal of this method is roughly described by a Ch'an phrase that translates as, "separate, or free, from the mind,



from thoughts, and from consciousness." To be free from all of this is to be in a state of enlightenment.

No matter what method you choose, you must remember that when we practice in the Ch'an tradition, we refrain from using words or speech. Why is this? It is because words represent ideas, concepts, mental descriptions. And it is only by leaving behind these things that we begin to understand the True Mind.

Two Ch'an maxims convey this idea: First, "Any thought is wrong." In other words whatever you are thinking is erroneous, no matter how clear or accurate you believe it to be. And second, "Whatever you say is wrong." No matter how well chosen or clearly spoken, your words rely on thoughts and ideas, and thus, they are fundamentally wrong.

Nonetheless, you will notice that Ch'an masters talk a lot. They sometimes write a lot, also. But the import of what we talk or write about is to convey that whatever you think or say is wrong. That is the content of all of my talks. No words or description will suffice to describe a state of realization. This is not the Ch'an tradition. Anyone who attempted to describe such a state would be considered by a Ch'an master to be a smart devil, not an awakened being.

Therefore, many Ch'an masters use no words when they interact with their disciples. They use move-

ments or gestures. Or sometimes when they do use words it is in an unconventional way. If a student asks a question about A, the master may give an answer that refers to B, something totally unrelated.

These methods are designed to help students to drop the habit of reasoning themselves to True Mind. Reasoning will not free you from mind, thought, or consciousness.

A story from the T'ang dynasty tells of a disciple who asked this question of his Dharma Master: "How can I calm my mind?" The master said, "I'm too busy to talk to you right now. Why not consult your First Dharma Brother?" He did as he was told and asked the same question. The first Dharma Brother said, "I have a headache. I can't talk now. Why not talk to Second Dharma Brother?" But the second Dharma Brother said, "I have a stomach ache, why don't you just go and talk to our Dharma Master?" So he went back to his master and complained, "Nobody told me anything. Nobody gave me any answers." But the master said to him reprovingly, "You really are a stupid fool. Everybody has been giving you the answer." Because of this, the disciple reached enlightenment.

Does this make sense to you? If you have any questions, I'll just refer you to Prof. Lee. Maybe he can tell you what you'd like to know.

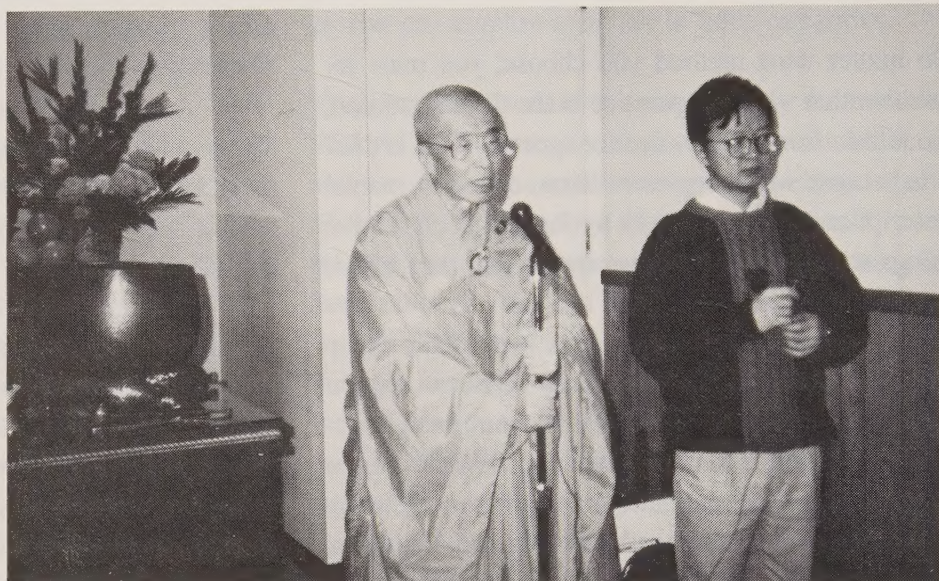


Drawing by Dorothy Weiner



## News Item

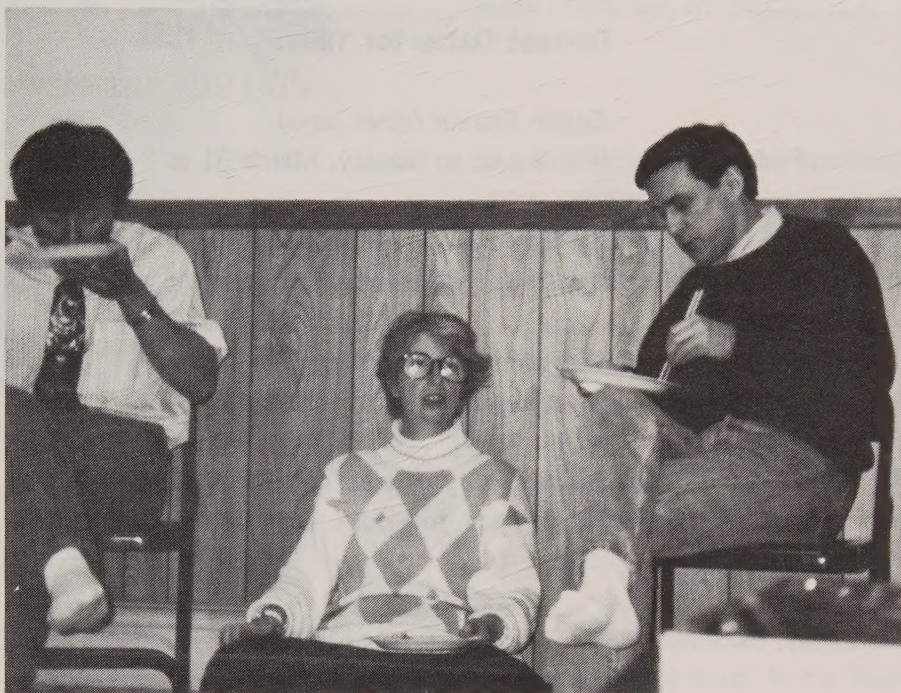
On February 17 we celebrated the Chinese New Year at the Center. Master Jen Chun gave his blessings to all assembled, and he delivered a wonderful talk on the need to use what the Buddha taught us: wisdom, compassion, humility, warmth, and the mind of acceptance. Guo Yuen Shih concluded the day by wishing everyone a good year and a tranquil mind. He bestowed his blessings on behalf of Shih-fu. He reminded us that because of the constant changing of time and space, every moment is new. Therefore we should not be overly elated when good things happen to us, nor despondent when things go wrong.



Over 200 people joined us for a day of chanting, vegetarian food and entertainment.







### Coming Events

Master Jen Chun will continue to give Sunday lectures on *The Buddha Speaks the Adornment of the Bodhicitta Sutra* on March 24, April 7 & 28.

Professor Li will also give Sunday lectures on *The Heart Sutra* on March 17 and April 14 & 21.

All Sunday lectures are free.

### Group Activities

On Saturday, March 23 there will be a Beginner's Meditation Class from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The basic principles of meditation will be taught. These include methods of sitting, breathing, walking, sleeping, Yoga exercises, and massage. If you have friends or relative who are interested, please contact us at the Ch'an Center.

On Saturday, April 6 there will be a one-day recitation of *The Bodhisattva Ksitigarbharaja Sutra*.

We have two more group sittings per week. Now you can come to the Center to sit on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 7:30 p.m. to 9 p.m.

We have a one-day meditation on March 16. \$10.00 for members. \$15.00 for non-members.

**Retreat Dates for 1991:***Easter Retreat (three days)*

Friday, March 29 at 8 a.m. to Sunday, March 31 at 8 p.m.

*Memorial Day Retreat*

Friday, May 24 at 7 p.m. to Saturday, June 1 at 8 a.m.

*Independence Day Retreat*

Friday, June 28 at 7 p.m. to Friday, July 5 at 8 a.m.

*Thanksgiving Day Retreat*

Friday, November 29 at 7 p.m. to Friday, December 6 at 8 a.m.

*Christmas Retreat*

Wednesday, December 25 at 7 p.m. to Wednesday, January 1, 1992 at 8 a.m.

The donation for each retreat is \$200.00 for non-members and \$100.00 for members. Applications are accepted three months in advance. We are now accepting applications for the Memorial Day Retreat.

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